

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

William Glasser, *The Art of Literary Thieving: The Catcher in the Rye, Moby-Dick, and Hamlet* (Cambria Press, 2009)

I never particularly subscribed to Harold Bloom's theory of how influence works – through a *misprision*, or a creative misreading, of one author by a younger successor. But, then again, all of our most important theories of literary influence seem more interesting than accurate. T. S. Eliot, for another example, viewed the canon as a Bergsonian flow that the young artist taps into, embodying and retroactively altering the whole of the tradition of literature. In *The Art of Literary Thieving*, William Glasser takes his crack at the tradition of theorizing influence.

For Glasser, tradition is a recurrence of a relationship between the author and his universe. In Glasser's study, Shakespeare, Melville, and Salinger share a similar connection to their worlds. Each sees a world of conflict and deception. For Shakespeare, it is a world of 'disharmon[y], of elemental forces seemingly opposed to each other' (179). Herman Melville then expressed his time's version of those same forces. Salinger likewise.

To Glasser's great credit, this tradition is not made out to be a magical one, some sort of mystical connection between Salinger and his forebears. Rather, the magic takes place in libraries and on reading lists. Salinger does not accidentally find his way into tradition; he follows 'an extensive plan of reading' of the authors he wishes to emulate (181). He does not tap into some mystical flow of creativity; he sees themes, structures, and approaches he admires, and he sets out to recreate them. During Salinger's 'impressionable years,' Glasser tells us, the budding author 'had committed himself to learning the writer's craft from the world's best authors' (8).

That Glasser sees tradition and influence in a less mystical way than his own forebears might have to do with his position in the world of literary criticism. He was trained more as a writer than a critic, and earned his PhD through the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. His focus, as might be expected of a creative writer, is on craft. Great writing is due less to accessing the mystical flow of genius (see Bergson, Deleuze, etc.) than it is due to hard work, revision, and the perfection of craft, all the elements of the contemporary creative writing workshop. Glasser is useful, at the least, for bringing this surprisingly under-represented point of view to the conversation. His view of tradition is actually no less romantic than Eliot's; Glasser's romanticism just happens to be tied closely to the benefits of hard work and a pragmatic approach.

If there is a drawback for readers of *Transnational Literature*, it is that Glasser's tradition is not a particularly transnational one. The strain of literature in *The Art of Literary Thieving* went from Shakespeare to Melville to Salinger, with no relevant stops in between. This is certainly not the point that Glasser intends to make, and it is unfairly reductive to claim he does so. Glasser spends a great deal of time unpacking Salinger's understanding of Eastern spirituality, for example. And he rightly treats Melville as a man of his time, importantly interacting with authors like Hawthorne.

But ultimately, the book is a love letter to the deep reading of inspiring authors. There is certainly plenty here for the scholar of literature – Salinger critics,

Book reviews: *The Art of Literary Thieving* by William Glasser. Paul Ardoin.
Transnational Literature Vol. 3 no. 2, May 2011.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

for example, will not want to miss Glasser's unique and fascinating takes on key scenes of *The Catcher in the Rye* – but for the scholar of *transnational* literature there is a certain dearth of Gilroy-esque ships-at-sea metaphors.

When I write about influence, I'm reminded of the two (admittedly not great) Charles Bukowski poems in which the speaker imagines authorial influence spread out across a ball field – 'batting order:' and '9 bad boys'. Both place the author in a specific (transnational but still Eurocentric) tradition. From 'batting order:':

I'm putting Céline in
cleanup,
he's inconsistent but when
he's good there's no
better.¹

What Bukowski and Glasser both suggest is that the literary artist chooses his or her own tradition. Glasser marks that moment as a stage of the author's hard work: 'Like Melville, who was also challenged by Shakespeare's accomplishments, Salinger apparently had his own literary yardstick in mind: the level of writing achieved by Melville and many of the great writers before him that he had so avidly read with the intention of becoming a writer of comparable accomplishment' (14), and, 'Melville clearly had *Hamlet* in mind as a touchstone that he would use both to shape and to judge his now intense effort to raise the quality of his own writing to the highest level he was capable of achieving' (122).

Glasser is not particularly interested in any Bloomian struggles and misreadings that emerge at the moment of putting pen to paper. His concern is the before – 'Salinger read extensively, gathering ideas from a wide variety of sources' (17); 'Melville was clearly a voracious reader and, with his own creative energies, transformed it into his own' (75) – and the evidence of influence that emerges in the writing afterward. Writers, then, are most importantly readers first, eventually identifying the tradition into which they wish to enter.

Readers of this journal might note complications with that formula. For them, Glasser might be most effectively read alongside a writer like Orhan Pamuk, who inserts transnational complications into this conversation. In some of the best essays of his *Other Colors*,² Pamuk struggles with his relationship to a Western European literary tradition he treasures and has desired to enter. My recommendation of Glasser to a scholar of transnational literature, then, would be of the 'best enjoyed with ...' variety.

Paul Ardoin

¹ Charles Bukowski, '9 bad boys,' *The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) 295; 'batting order', *The Last Night of the Earth Poems* (New York: Echo, 2002) 401-402.

² Orhan Pamuk, *Other Colors: Essays and a Story* trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Vintage International, 2007). Among the best and most relevant to this discussion are 'Who Do You Write For?'; 'André Gide'; 'A Guide to Being Mediterranean'; and 'Where Is Europe?'